

Professional Guidance on the Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media

THE GENERAL
TEACHING COUNCIL
FOR SCOTLAND



The Purpose of this Professional Guidance

The rise in popularity of social media in recent years has resulted in many teachers using social media to enhance their classroom practice, introducing their pupils to new tools and delivering the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways. The majority of teachers using these tools do so without encountering any difficulty; however registered teachers student teachers and others who may seek registration in the future should be aware of the many challenges and ramifications associated with the use of electronic communication and social media.

This Professional Guidance will help identify potential dangers, offer some guidance about how to avoid them and provide a context for responsible, professional use of electronic communication and social media.

Online communications and social media include software, applications (including those running on mobile devices), e-mail and websites which enable users to interact, create and exchange information online. Examples include, but are not limited to, sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Wikipedia and MySpace. Also included is the use of SMS and instant messaging systems, such as MSN Messenger and BBM.

The Code of Professionalism and Conduct (CoPAC)

This Guidance should be read in conjunction with The Code of Professionalism and Conduct (CoPAC) and the Student Teacher Code (STC), ('the Codes') in which GTC Scotland sets out the key aspects of teacher professionalism.

Maintaining the public's trust in individual teachers, and in the teaching profession as a whole, is central to the concept of fitness to teach. This trust can be undermined by behaviour occurring not only in a teacher's professional lives but also in their private lives, including activity online.

New Contexts for Teaching and Learning

From e-mail to text and from blogging to tweets, technology is becoming ever-present in our lives and is an increasingly essential tool in the classroom. New technologies open up a whole range of creative possibilities to help pupils; they provide new access to assignments and resources and connect classrooms with other communities and countries in ways which would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

The ability to communicate in real time with others and to access networks across the world offers great opportunities for teachers to promote good learning; it also presents great challenges, as the traditional boundaries between teacher and pupil can quickly become blurred.

The views of teachers about their own profession are central to the integrity of a self-regulating profession. However, the difficulty with social media is that teachers sometimes forget that the things they say and do online may be perceived differently from another point of view. The perspective of parents and the understandable fears of the wider public about inappropriate use of the internet also have to be considered; and these views can sometimes be shaped by sources which are unpredictable - including the media. Teachers therefore need to be alert to the risk that actions which may seem quite innocent can be misunderstood and misconstrued by others.

Private and Professional life

It is important to note that the GTC Scotland Codes emphasise that teachers are individuals with the right to private lives. Off-duty conduct may however still have a bearing on the professional life of a teacher: actions which may not seem relevant to pupils may still have an impact on a teacher's fitness to teach. Sound judgement and due care should therefore be exercised at all times.

Professional Vulnerability

Teachers can be vulnerable to unintended misuses of electronic communication. E-mail, texting and social media encourage casual dialogue; and very innocent actions can easily be misconstrued or manipulated.

Electronic messages are not anonymous and can continue to develop a life of their own long after the original message has disappeared. Social Media sites can archive content even when deleted from online profiles. In effect, once information is placed online you relinquish control of it.

Social media can disarm inhibitions; it brings a new dimension and 'feel' to a relationship. It is particularly important to be mindful of this whenever a student and a teacher consider becoming 'friends' in an online environment. A teacher should never share information with students in ANY environment that they would not willingly or appropriately share in a school or school-related setting, or in the community.

The Legal Implications

The Codes draw attention to the potential impact of criminal convictions on registered teachers and on those wishing to become registered.

Careless or unwise behaviour online can result in criminal action or, in some cases, civil action brought by others. Online behaviour should therefore be treated with caution.

Fitness to Teach Implications

Central to GTC Scotland's Fitness to Teach framework is the protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults; and the maintenance of public trust in the teaching profession. All complaints are considered fairly and in the same way regardless of whether or not they are associated with the internet or involve electronic communication.

In the area of electronic communication and social media, however, the behaviours listed below have previously warranted disciplinary measures:

- inappropriate electronic communication with pupils, colleagues and parents/carers, including SMS and instant messaging;
- posting/sending sexually explicit pictures/images to colleagues or pupils;
- grooming - whereby a teacher uses electronic messages with a view to establishing an inappropriate relationship with a pupil;
- possessing, making, viewing or distributing indecent images of children;
- using inappropriate YouTube content in the educational setting.

How can teachers minimise risk when using electronic communication and social networking?

As a teacher you should:

- always maintain a formal and courteous and professional tone in communicating with pupils and ensure that professional boundaries are maintained;
- only use official channels of communication e.g. GLOW and work e-mail addresses, and be aware of and comply with employer's policies and guidance;
- not exchange private texts, phone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photos of a personal nature with pupils;
- firmly decline student-initiated 'friend' requests from pupils and do not instigate any yourself. Use your own discretion when dealing with "friend" requests from parents. It is acceptable to decline these invitations and remind parents of more formal channels through which they can discuss their child's education;
- operate online in a way in which would not call into question your position as a professional;
- realise that pupils will naturally be curious about your personal life outside school and may try to find out more about you.
- manage your privacy settings and keep them under review. These are particularly important in regard to photos. Remember that no privacy mechanism is 100% guaranteed;
- ensure your settings prohibit others from tagging you in any photos or updates without your permission. You can ask others to remove any undesirable content related to you;
- audit and re-evaluate the information about you and who has access to it if you are entering a programme of teacher education, or your Teacher Induction Period;
- be aware that potential employers may try and view your online social media profiles;
- consider that conversations held online may not be private. Be aware of who may have access to what you post;
- assume that information you post can be accessed and altered;
- do not discuss pupils, colleagues, parents or carers online or criticise your employer or others within the school community;
- respect pupil privacy and confidentiality at all times;
- use strong passwords and change them regularly. Protect your mobile phone/smart phone/tablet computer with a PIN, especially when in school, to protect access to its content and potential misuse;
- bring the matter to the attention of your employer using the proper procedures, if you are the victim of cyber bullying or are uncomfortable with comments, photos or posts made by pupils about you.

How can teachers minimise risk for their pupils when using electronic communication and social networking?

As a teacher you should:

- report the matter to your manager using the appropriate procedures if you come across or are made aware of inappropriate use of electronic communication or social networking by a pupil or concerning a pupil;
- alert your pupils to and encourage them to use appropriate, responsible and safe online behaviour;
- be aware of and comply with your employer's rules and policy in regard to taking and sharing photos of children.

In Conclusion

Before posting materials online stop and ask yourself:

(1) Will the content reflect poorly on you, your school, employer or the teaching profession?

(2) Is your intention to post this material driven by personal reasons or professional reasons?

(3) Are you confident that the comment or other media in question, if accessed by others, (colleagues, parents etc) would be considered reasonable and appropriate?